AN INDIAN MAN IN THE EASTERN POLISH CITY OF PRZEMYSL WAITS FOR HIS FRIENDS TO CROSS OVER FROM UKRAINE. PHOTO: WOJTEK RADWANSKI/ AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

VICE News

The Terror of Studying Abroad in Ukraine and Getting Caught in Russia's War

"These are future doctors, but right now, they're fighting over supplies for survival."

By Pallavi Pundir
JAKARTA, ID

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A year ago, Muhammad Israfeel moved to the Ukrainian capital Kyiv with dreams of becoming a doctor.

close friend from Afghanistan, who, like him, was studying at a medical college in the city.

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Israfeel was one of the nearly 80,000 foreign students caught in the war Russia launched on Ukraine last week. Ukraine is almost the size of Texas, and students from 155 countries are estimated to contribute immensely – some $542 million yearly – to the country's economy.

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HEATHER CHEN

03.01.22

"We had to protest to convince the Ukrainian soldiers to let us through with the Ukrainian citizens. Aren't we humans too? Don't we deserve to go home?" Israfeel told VICE World News. He was shoved and pushed on the queue for nearly three days, before he finally crossed the border into Poland.

INDIAN STUDENTS ARRIVED FROM UKRAINE AT THE NEW DELHI INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT AS PROTESTS ERUPTED IN THE CITY OVER THE SAFETY OF THE STUDENTS. PHOTO: SANJEEV VERMA/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Nearly a quarter of Ukraine's foreign students are from South Asia, and a third of them were studying to become doctors, like Israfeel. They came to Ukraine for medical degrees that can cost up to four times more in their own countries. In India and Pakistan, medical colleges are competitive and private colleges can cost up to $20,000 annually, while in Ukraine, universities offer medical degrees for $6,600 a year. More than one in ten doctors in the U.S. is of South Asian descent.

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train station after the bombing, the strenuous ride to the western border city of Lviv, and his feet are still throbbing from the excruciating 50 mile walk to the Polish border.

Many of his friends contracted COVID-19 along the way, he said, while some fainted from the blistering cold. "One of my friends has not spoken since we crossed the border," he said. "He is not in his senses and we're trying to figure out his treatment."

"WE HAD TO PROTEST TO CONVINCE THE UKRAINIAN SOLDIERS TO LET US THROUGH WITH THE UKRAINIAN CITIZENS. AREN'T WE HUMANS TOO? DON'T WE DESERVE TO GO HOME?" SAID MOHAMMAD ISRAFEEL (PICTURED).

rates. Even embassies put out advisories too late. Israfeel was one of the tens of thousands of young students who was left to fend for himself.

The evacuation points along the Ukrainian border became scenes of desperation and chaos. At the border with Poland, which is witnessing the largest refugee influx right now, there are reports of violence and racism.

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Things are no different on the border with Romania.

Priti Sahu, a second-year medical student from India studying in the western city of Ivano-Frankivsk, managed to reach refugee camps in Romania early this week. Before she and her companions crossed over, she said, they saw Ukrainian soldiers assaulting students, firing shots in the air, pepper-spraying the crowd and even extorting money before letting them pass through.

PRITI SAHU, WHO IS IN ONE OF THE CAMPS IN ROMANIA, SAID FIGHTS ARE BREAKING OUT AMONG STUDENTS TO GRAB ON TO BASIC THINGS LIKE FOOD AND WATER. PHOTO: HARSH RAMESHWARBAI SONI

The situation has left the students desperate. "These are future doctors, but right now, they're fighting over supplies for survival," said Sahu, who is still waiting for a flight home in Romania. "Right now, I just want to hold my family and cry. None of us imagined we would go through something like this."

She and the other students are relatively safe now in a bare-bones shelter with no beds, but lots of blankets and outlets for them to charge their

to escape Odessa city into Romania, and he stayed connected to his father and brother in India on FaceTime throughout most of the journey.

Before leaving his apartment near Ivano-Frankivsk National Medical University where he was studying, Soni showed VICE World News their stressed faces on a screen. "They do not want to disconnect. They want to see me for 24 hours continuously whatever I am going through. They want to be with me."

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'They Hit Me': African Nationals Have Been Assaulted Trying to Escape Ukraine

ANYA ZOLEDZIOWSKI, FESTUS IYORAH, BEN MAKUCH

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HARSH RAMESHWARBAI SONI, WHO STUDIES IN ODESSA, SHOWS HOW HIS PARENTS REFUSE TO TURN OFF THEIR VIDEO CALL ALL THE WHILE HE WAS STUCK. (RIGHT) SONI WALKED UP TO 30 KM TO REACH THE ROMANIAN BORDER.

The stories of those who escaped may be harrowing, but they worry about hundreds more students like them still stranded in Ukraine.

In the last two days, two Indian students died as the battle raged. One of them, Naveen S Gyanagoudar, was killed in shelling on Tuesday when he stepped out to buy supplies in Kharkiv. Roshan Jha, a fourth-year medical student, was with Gyanagoudar that morning before he was killed.

"There were missiles dropping every second," said Jha, who's from Nepal. Jha said he and his friends, including Gyanagoudar, had planned to escape together that morning.

"But after Naveen was hit by shelling, we're gripped with panic. We had spent six days in a shelter, and our supplies had run out. Naveen had gone out to buy the supplies," he told VICE World News from the Lviv railway station, where he and his friends escaped on Wednesday morning and had been waiting for hours to find transport to Poland's border. "I don't even have the words to explain what we just went through. And

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RUBY LOTT-LAVIGNA

Saharsh Patel, a 19-year-old medical student from India studying in the northern-eastern city of Sumy, which borders Russia, is still hiding in the city and waiting out the crisis. The news of deaths has instilled more panic and fear.

MEDICAL STUDENT SAHARSH PATEL FROM INDIA CAPTURED A MOMENT IN HIS UNIVERSITY BUNKER IN KHARKIV, WHERE HE HAS BEEN HOLED UP FOR THE LAST WEEK. PHOTO: SAHARSH PATEL

"We're running out of supplies that we had bought last week," said Patel. "Now after the deaths, we're too scared to step out to buy more food and water."

So far, according to news reports more than 350 Pakistanis and 400 Bangladeshis have managed to get out of Ukraine. Meanwhile, around 200 Nepalese are still stuck in Ukraine.

Many have criticised their government's evacuation efforts. Criticism is particularly strong in India, which has the largest number of international students in Ukraine, at 18,000. Some of these students complained the government was not doing enough to help them. Protests have erupted in some Indian cities.

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FAMILY MEMBERS OF INDIAN STUDENTS STRANDED IN CRISIS-HIT UKRAINE PROTEST NEAR THE EMBASSY OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION IN NEW DELHI. PHOTO: SONU MEHTA/HINDUSTAN TIMES VIA GETTY IMAGES

Soni, speaking now from Romania after escaping Odessa, said he had not seen any assistance from the Indian embassy even at the Romanian camps. The 23-year-old added that an advisory from the Indian embassy from early this week circulated helpline numbers, which turned out to be local Romanians' personal numbers. Those Romanians, Soni said, had no clue why their numbers were given out as they had nothing to do with any relief work.

"The government is giving this picture that they helped students, but they only got to a select few," he said. "The rest of us are still struggling on both sides of the border." In a Telegram group called TeamSOSIndia with over 5,000 members, volunteers continue to coordinate with students stranded in Ukraine.

afternoon. "But this memory is going to haunt me for the rest of my life."

Follow Pallavi Pundir on Twitter.

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